

Thoughts From Larry Livingston

Larry Livingston

SYMBIOSIS

As a sophomore music education major, I distinctly recall William D. Revelli, Director of Bands at the University of Michigan, telling us, "Understand, if you invite me to guest conduct your high school band, I am going to want to hear your marching band as well." Thus for him, the bands, all of them taken as one, were the grail. He was really talking about developing a symbiotic relationship across the spectrum of one's work as a music educator, which for him meant band director. Any modern day thinking which separates the marching band, a "non-artistic" entity, from the concert band, an "artistic" entity, is the antithesis of the Revelli paradigm.

The marching band can be seen simply as a servo-mechanism for entertainment, the vehicle by which the community, the administration, the parents, and the coaches measure the quality of your program. But in a holistic model, it carries the same standards for performance excellence, discipline, and precision that is manifest in the concert band. I ask: Why is the marching band not also, and primarily, a machine for teaching how music works, how concepts which inhere in good music-making should apply to every musical endeavor?

CONCEPTUAL TEACHING

If we are to succeed in the quest to instill valid, core concepts of music, we must ponder the methodology of how we teach. If we tell a clarinet section, "Do not rush in measure nine," that is about obedience. If we

tell that same group, or better the entire ensemble, "Every time you have running notes in fast tempo music you will tend to rush," this is a commitment to thinking in action. If the French horns see the dynamic marking, piano, but have thematic content, we may be inclined to say, "Play louder." That request solves the immediate problem but does not center on concept. On the other hand, if we say, "Dynamics are entirely contextual. How loud or soft one plays is guided by the marking, but must also take into account big picture factors: Is what I am playing thematic or is it accompanimental? Is it new material? Do I have a moving line? Is my part likely to overwhelm or be lost in the shuffle?" Such input replaces circumstance with a larger notion, asks the student to become an arbiter, not merely, an executor of musical decisions; sets the student free to be a stand-alone performer, an active, cogitative participant in the band.

Conceptual teaching of musical ensembles is based on the same pedagogical strategy that the math teacher, the English teacher, and the science teacher invoke every day. They do so because the goal is long-term understanding and application of principles, not moment-to-moment hypothesizing. If we wish to set our students free to make music for the rest of their lives, do we not owe them a set of "how music works" ideas?

In the end, music is played by ear. A large concert band is really a chamber music ensemble on steroids.

A marching band is a mobile outdoor version of same. When the band program is built on a central rubric of ear-based understanding, not simple execution, the students are led to enlightenment and, thus, power. The goal is to teach conceptually rather than circumstantially, and to do it with such determination that the band does not need you any more.

TRANSCRIPTIONS

In the old days, bands played orchestra transcriptions for two reasons. First, because they were wonderful music, albeit passed through the altering prism of bandstrations; and second, because of the paucity of quality band literature. Now, original music is plentiful, much of it playable by high school bands. But transcriptions remain a valuable resource. Our students can grow enormously by working on and studying the music of Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, Wagner, et al, music the students are likely to hear at concerts. For decades professional bands in Europe have performed band arrangements of orchestral masterpieces. We are not committing a crime in doing so with our school bands, despite pressure to the contrary from the polemic of some collegiate wind ensemble leaders. We are providing a transcendent musical experience for our students. Of course, playing transcriptions must include a broader educational objective. Students should not only be made aware of the original orchestra version of each work, they should also be

Thoughts From Larry Livingston

encouraged to watch it on YouTube, and/or attend concerts where it may be performed. Just playing transcriptions is not enough. Apropos, I cite an anecdote from The Midwest Clinic a few years ago. Two students outfitted in band uniforms, medals hanging off their jackets like badges of military distinction, came into Tower Records and were looking through the classical music bins. One pulled out a record jacket and remarked to his friend, "I did not know there was an orchestra version of *1812 Overture!*"

BIG PICTURE

I send now a clarion call to consider the following:

- 1) Are we first, music educators, and second, band directors, or vice versa?
- 2) What percentage of the students in your school are doing music?
- 3) Do you teach from the perspective of the sage on the stage or the guide on the side?
- 4) Do you have a chamber music program? Do students run these ensembles?
- 5) Are you tracking the ongoing music-making of your graduates who are not pursuing careers in music?
- 6) Do you routinely use harmonic/theoretical analysis and musicological research in your score preparation?

7) Do you periodically ask your peers to observe your teaching and make positive but candid evaluations?

8) Do you encourage or allow your students to study a secondary instrument?

9) Do you have an orchestra in your school? Why not?

THOUGHTS BEYOND LINCOLNSHIRE POSY

Can you teach guitar, mariachi, country fiddle, composition, improvisation, jazz, strings, rock and roll, or keyboard? Our students today are musical omnivores, purveyors of styles and genres on a broader and more diverse scale than ever before. Imagine a school in which more than fifty percent of the students are involved in music in some form, playing it, composing it, improvising it. Now imagine a school whose students are engaged in music-making not limited to traditional band literature but also akin to what might be found on their mp3 players. Imagine being the über manager of such an eclectic musical enterprise. Imagine the impact on/in the school, the band room transformed into a dynamic theater for musical exploration, the likelihood that graduates will keep doing music. Fantasy? Heretical? Unrealistic? Perhaps. Yes to points one and three, and for some, dangerously close to Yes for number 2. Nonetheless, just imagine...

Larry Livingston is a distinguished conductor, educator, and administrator, and a highly respected motivational speaker. The founding Music Director of the Illinois Chamber Orchestra, Livingston has appeared with the Houston Symphony and in the Los Angeles Philharmonic Green Umbrella Series. He has conducted at the Festival de Musique in Evian, France, and has led the Stockholm Wind Orchestra, as well as the Leopoldinum Chamber, Chopin Academy, and Wroclaw Philharmonic Orchestras in Poland. He served as Music Director of the Pan Pacific Festival Orchestras in Sydney, participated in the International Jazz Festival in Rome, and conducted electro-acoustic ensemble concerts in Tokyo under the auspices of Yamaha International. Mr. Livingston has led the American Youth Symphony Orchestra, the Young Musicians Foundation Orchestra, the USC Thornton Chamber and Symphony Orchestras in Los Angeles, the USC Thornton Contemporary Music Ensemble in Berlin, and served on the jury for the renowned Besancon International Conducting Competition in Besancon, France.

A graduate of the University of Michigan, Mr. Livingston received the Alumnus of the Year Award from the University of Michigan School of Music in 1988. Mr. Livingston served as Vice President and Music Director of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where he was also Conductor of the Symphony Orchestra and, subsequently, became Dean of the Shepherd School of Music and Elma Schneider Professor at Rice University in Houston. From 1986 until 2002, Mr. Livingston was Dean of the USC Flora L. Thornton School of Music, where he is Chair of the Conducting Department. The first music administrator accepted into the Harvard University Executive Education Program, he is a recipient of the Life in the Arts Award from Idyllwild Arts and an Outstanding Teacher Award from the USC Center for Religion. From 2008 to 2015, Mr. Livingston was Director of Educational Initiatives for the Guitar Center where he leads the national educational quest, ALL IN.

Larry Livingston was the 2017 TBA Featured Clinician and is an Educational Clinician for the Conn-Selmer Corporation.